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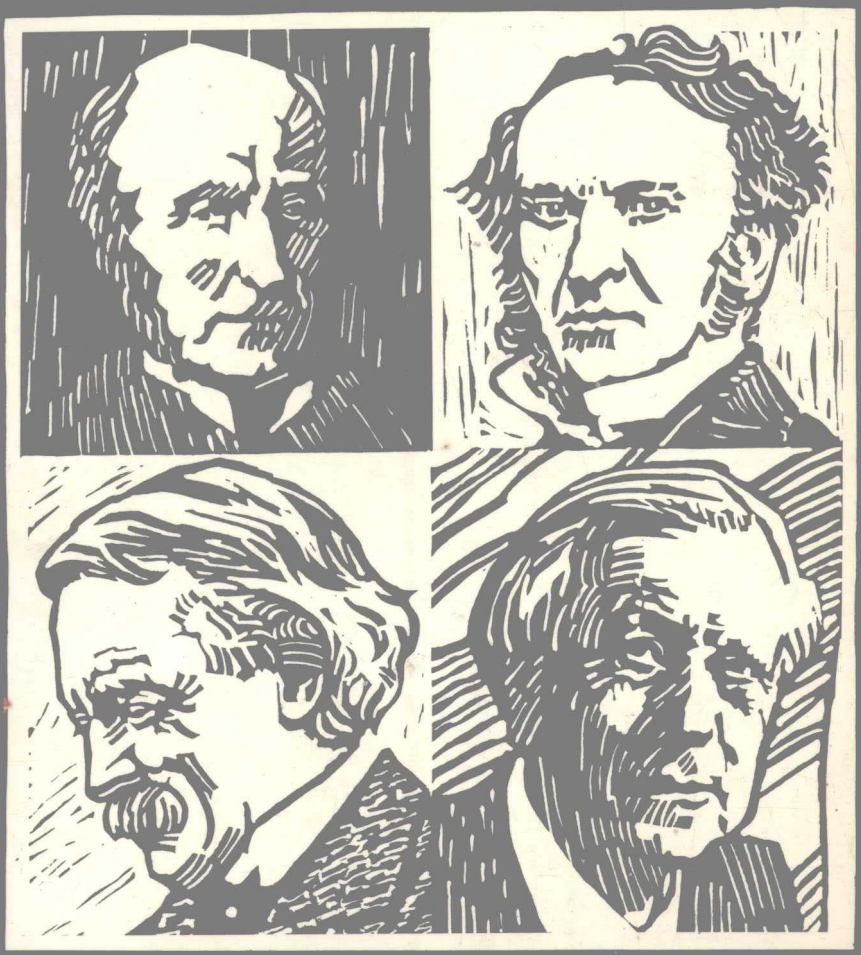
British Liberalism

Liberal Thought from the 1640s to 1980s



ROBERT ECCLESHALL

BRITISH LIBERALISM

Liberal thought from the 1640s to 1980s

Robert Eccleshall

Longman
London and New York

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE, England
Associated companies throughout the world

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

First published 1986

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

British liberalism : liberal thought from the 1640s to 1980s.—(Documents in political ideas)
1. Liberalism—Great Britain—History
I. Eccleshall, Robert II. Series
320.5'1'0941 JA84.G7

ISBN 0-582-29655-2

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Main entry under title:

British liberalism.
(Documents in political ideas)
1. Liberalism—Great Britain—History—
Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Eccleshall, Robert.
JA84.G7B68 1986 320.5'1'0941 85-18063
ISBN 0-582-29655-2

Set in 10/11pt Comp/Set Plantin
Produced by Longman Group (FE) Limited
Printed in Hong Kong

DOCUMENTS IN POLITICAL IDEAS

General editor: *Bernard Crick*

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Students of political ideas will be familiar with the debate among their teachers about texts and contexts, whether the study of political ideas primarily concerns the meaning of a text or an understanding of the main ideas of an epoch. Both should be done but not confused; and texts need setting in their context. But it is easier for the student to find and to read the texts of political philosophers than to be able to lay his hands upon the range of materials that would catch the flavour of the thinking of an age or a movement, both about what should be done and about how best to use common concepts that create different perceptions of political problems and activity.

So this series aims to present carefully chosen anthologies of the political ideas of thinkers, publicists, statesmen, actors in political events, extracts from State papers and common literature of the time, in order to supplement and complement, not to replace, study of the texts of political philosophers. They should be equally useful to students of politics and of history.

Each volume will have an authoritative and original introductory essay by the editor of the volume. Occasionally instead of an era, movement or problem, an individual writer will figure, writers of a kind who are difficult to understand (like Edmund Burke) simply by the reading of any single text.

B. R. C.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This book is intended to illustrate a tradition of political discourse which originated in the seventeenth century. It is not a history of the Liberal party which experienced a relatively brief period of political ascendancy: the party was not formally inaugurated until 1859 and there has been no Liberal Prime Minister since Lloyd George lost office in 1922. Some of the policy issues which preoccupied the party – the question of Irish Home Rule, for instance – have been ignored. Although the later extracts reflect the attitudes of Liberal party activists and supporters, leading politicians are not strongly represented. There are only short extracts, for example, from the speeches and writings of W. E. Gladstone, H. H. Asquith, David Lloyd George and Jo Grimond. Party leaders rarely provide the most succinct expression of particular ideas or themes. There are, in any case, plenty of books about Liberal Party policies and structure, as well as on the beliefs and influence of party statesmen. But there is no source book on British liberalism from its origins to the present day. This anthology is designed to fill the gap.

The book includes extracts from the principal exponents of liberalism – John Locke, J. S. Mill, T. H. Green, J. M. Keynes and so on – and also from the writings of many less familiar figures. The aim throughout has been to tell a coherent story and each extract has been chosen because it sheds light on some aspect of the ideology. My principles of selection have been either originality (especially with the more influential thinkers) or, more usually, clarity of argument. This latter criterion has occasionally given scope to opt for some neglected writers who, in my judgement, merit rehabilitation. Discussions of the utilitarian theory of democracy, for example, tend to focus on James Mill's *Essay on government.* But the lesser known George Grote presented the utilitarian case for democracy in a more structured and revealing manner. So I have chosen an extract from his *Essentials of*

parliamentary reform rather than from Mill's *Essay*. Josiah Tucker, to take another example, was a witty and piquant writer who expressed Whiggish opinions on a range of issues. I have chosen a short extract from one of his many attacks upon Lockean radicals because he, too, has been badly served by historians. If this anthology encourages readers to find out more about liberalism, I hope that some of them will survey the neglected byways of the tradition. There is much to explore.

I should like to thank Bernard Crick for inviting me to produce this anthology and for sound advice on the way; and Vincent Geoghegan, David Gregg, Richard Jay, Christopher Shorley and Rick Wilford for help in its preparation. Margaret McCrum and Pauline McElhill typed the extracts with their usual speed and efficiency.

Robert Eccleshall

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Histories of liberalism fall into two categories. There are, first, partisan accounts calculated to inspire the faithful and to win converts to the liberal creed. The story told is of a movement for individual emancipation from successive forms of arbitrary power and outworn privilege. It is an heroic tale in which bearers of the torch of freedom emerge as magnanimous individuals intent on creating a fairer, more tolerant and diversified society. Hence a tendency to designate liberalism as the mobilization of decent impulses on behalf of social progress: the spirit of 'liberality', as Lord Selborne put it, 'transferred only to the sphere of politics'.* It is also a success story of battles won against such varied obstacles to individual liberty as absolute monarchy, religious conformity, economic protectionism, an undemocratic franchise and the degrading poverty which stems from unbridled capitalism. Each victory marks a consolidation of individual rights and, in consequence, an extension of opportunities for self-expression. Liberalism, on this assessment, has for three centuries spearheaded the transformation of society from semi-feudal despotism into a structure of liberties equally available to every citizen. It is this incessant opposition to the forces of privilege and oppression which is said to endow the liberal movement with coherence.[2]

But not every commentator is inclined to read the movement's history backwards from a checklist of policies successfully completed, and there are, secondly, more detached accounts intended to disclose the identity of liberalism as a body of ideas. In these commentaries a ragged story tends to unfold - often prefaced by acknowledgment of the ideology's apparent intellectual messiness.[3] Here is little sympathy

* References to material in this anthology are given in the text inside [square] brackets, indicating the number of the document in this book in which the extract occurs. Other references are given in the normal way, and are listed at the end of this introduction.

with the sanguine judgement that 'Liberalism has an advantage over other political creeds in being far more easily and more clearly defined'.[4] So numerous are the strands of liberalism, it is admitted, that the casual observer may dismiss the doctrine as essentially ambivalent. Sometimes it is concluded that even a detailed inspection can detect no unifying thread in the various arguments and objectives which constitute the liberal tradition. To search for such a nuclear identity, we are told, is to embark upon a misconceived and ultimately barren enterprise. We should be content instead to convey the full range of ideas which have been embraced by liberals down the centuries.[5]

What makes the character of liberalism elusive is the elasticity of its key concept. Liberals have championed the cause of freedom on the assumption that individuals are rational enough to shape their conduct and beliefs with minimal interference from State or Church. They have sought to disperse authority from the central agencies of society so that its members might exercise a degree of self-government or personal responsibility. But liberty is a flabby and ambiguous concept which yields neither a settled meaning nor consensus about the conditions in which it is secured.

Liberals certainly do not monopolize the different uses made of their prized idea. So versatile is the rhetoric of freedom that it features in most ideological accounts of society. In modern Britain, for example, it is central to the debate about the proper functions of the State. Conservatives tend to equate freedom with the unhindered pursuit by individuals of private ambition. Hence their demand for a competitive market economy in which the State is restricted to the provision of a system of law and order. Socialists, by contrast, believe that *laissez-faire* capitalism engenders a predatory and greatly unequal society in which the poor and unemployed are coerced by material insecurity. Hence their demand for an interventionist State which, through economic management and social welfare, establishes a platform of comfort upon which all citizens may freely shape their existence. Far from producing an undisputed set of political and economic prescriptions for organizing society, therefore, freedom is part of the shared language through which alternative ideological messages are proclaimed.

Liberalism itself has encompassed the contrary meanings which conservatives and socialists attach to freedom. Earlier liberals believed that liberty flourishes in a free-enterprise economy that imposes few restrictions on the accumulation of private property. From the end of the nineteenth century, however, liberals began to abandon the ideal of

a minimal State in which individual property rights were sacrosanct. Gross inequalities of wealth and income, it was acknowledged, impaired the freedom of people whose struggle for survival afforded them little scope to make the best of their capacities. They now urged some political control of the economy to eliminate unemployment and low wages, as well as public provision of social welfare.

Commentators often treat the historical transformation of liberalism as an ideological shift of seismic proportions. They have conceptualized it as a transition from individualism to collectivism or, alternatively, as a rejection of negative liberty for a more positive conception of freedom – terms, in fact, which were coined by liberals at the end of the nineteenth century in an attempt to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. Early liberals, it is said, viewed society as an arena of self-sufficient and competitive individuals who were free in so far as they could pursue their private interests without coercion; whereas their successors envisage society as a collectivity of interdependent individuals who cannot fulfil their potentialities unless government assumes active responsibility for the public good. It is sometimes added that this shift from the ideal of a minimal State signified the moral decline or theoretical disintegration of liberalism. Right-wing critics, for example, argue that the concept of positive liberty is potentially despotic because it gives government licence to do whatever is considered expedient to transform subjects into good citizens.[6] Socialist commentators, by contrast, often suggest that liberalism has been stranded by the tide of history. The ideology was so inextricably tied to the age of *laissez-faire*, it is claimed, that subsequent liberals have failed to provide convincing arguments for an interventionist State.[7]

Within each historical half of liberalism, too, there emerge divergences of belief and policy. Many early liberals advocated a radical programme to secure various civil liberties – freedom of speech and assembly, religious toleration, freedom from arbitrary arrest or imprisonment and so forth – and to establish a much broader electoral franchise. They opposed every form of customary privilege and championed popular rights. But not every liberal was a populist. The principal carriers of the banner of British liberalism in the eighteenth century were the Whigs, who wished to curb the power of monarchy by means of parliamentary checks and balances. Though staunch defenders of limited and representative government, Whigs nevertheless supported the traditional social hierarchy of wealth and power in which their property rights were preserved. They resisted democratic pressures, and the 'rights of the people' for which they agitated was

often little more than a euphemism for the privileges of the rich. Modern liberalism also reveals different emphases. Although twentieth-century liberals have advocated social and economic planning, many believe that individual liberty has been threatened by the growth of a centralized State.

If liberalism seems an ideology of infinite variety, part of the difficulty lies with the history of the concept itself. The adjective 'liberal' has for many centuries denoted a generous and tolerant disposition or habit of mind. Only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, was the epithet attached to European political creeds and parties. The noun 'liberalism' was coined soon afterwards to designate a political movement. Equipped with a novel term, historians refined it into a concept for classifying ideological strands associated with the evolution of the modern, capitalist world. Liberalism thus became a convenient label for an array of ideas and policies which often exhibited little in common beyond a general intention to liberate individuals from conventional economic and political constraints upon their activities. In modern usage, therefore, liberalism provides an ideological map of many of the major developments which have occurred in Britain and elsewhere since the seventeenth century. This means, of course, that the doctrine cannot be reduced either to timeless beliefs or to a single set of objectives and policies.

But the diversity of liberalism does not mean that it is essentially incoherent. The ideology, as the extracts in this anthology illustrate, does possess an unfolding identity which emerges in three recurrent themes: one conceptual; another related to liberalism's social roots; the third, a persistent image of society that derives from the other two. Conceptually, liberals have repeatedly affirmed an equal right to liberty. This claim that liberty ought to be shared equally throughout society is neither simple nor straightforward.[8] For one thing, it begs the question as to which particular freedoms should be made available to every citizen. Liberals have provided several answers. The early liberals were primarily concerned to safeguard all individuals against arbitrary government through the legal guarantee of various civil rights: security of property, religious liberty and so forth. Many later liberals favoured an equal distribution of political rights in the form of a democratic franchise. In this century the intention of most liberals has been to implement an equality of social or welfare rights: universal access to a minimum standard of comfort judged essential for a truly free existence.[9] So there has been little continuity of agreement about the measures required in order to enhance liberty. Historically,

nevertheless, liberalism can be viewed as a succession of strategies for expanding the freedoms to which individuals are considered to be equally entitled.

The ideology, secondly, took shape from the particular social interests to which it was attached. 'In its living principle', wrote Harold Laski, liberalism 'was the idea by which the new middle class rose to a position of political dominance.'[10] Laski's statement requires qualification in so far as Britain never experienced clear-cut conflict between an ascendant middle class and an aristocracy in decline. The transition from agrarian to industrial society was relatively undramatic because the landed classes were themselves involved in commerce and industry. It would be mistaken, therefore, to suppose that liberalism originated as pure bourgeois ideology. Initially, in fact, there were two forms of liberalism: Whiggism embraced by owners of substantial property in commerce and finance, as well as land; and a more radical doctrine, whose earliest exponents were the Levellers in the middle of the seventeenth century, that was espoused by less prosperous social groups. Neither variants of liberalism constituted a eulogy of the middle classes. Whigs argued that the economic security enjoyed by men of rank and wealth gave them an interest in social stability while affording them sufficient leisure to acquire knowledge and political experience. The rich, in consequence, were entitled to wield political power since they were most likely to safeguard liberty against either the anarchic impulses of the masses or the despotic inclinations of the Crown. Radicals, by contrast, claimed that the privileges of inherited wealth sustained an exploitative aristocracy which frustrated the rights and freedoms of common people. Although these early radicals opposed monopolies, tithes and other economic practices which inhibited the transfer of aristocratic wealth to other social groups, they were hardly the ideologues of an aspirant middle class. Their ideal, rather, was a society of masterless men – smallholders of land, self-employed craftsmen, tradesmen and so forth – based upon a widespread distribution of property: a community in which great inequalities of wealth had been eroded and where, in consequence, everyone owned enough property to be independent of the political control of any social class. Liberalism, then, did not originate as the buoyant expression of the aspirations of a confident bourgeoisie.

But perhaps Laski's own phrase – 'in its living principle' – is sufficient to qualify the claim that liberalism is grounded in middle-class interests, for the ideology did convey ideas associated with the eventual triumph of capitalism. As society evolved, liberals increasingly denigrated the landed aristocracy and extolled the virtues